
Reflections on a Storm

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On August 25, 2017, when the University of Houston closed its campus in anticipation of Hurricane Harvey, I had no idea what was in store. Being still new to Houston, I had experienced rain and flooding, but had not yet experienced the impact of a storm of this nature. In the days that followed, it quickly became clear that we were experiencing what we now know was a historic weather event. I was personally very fortunate to live in a part of Houston that was not severely impacted by Hurricane Harvey. There was rain, but no significant flooding. However, I watched, along with the rest of the country, much of the city of Houston and its residents experience incredible devastation. Many students of the Graduate College of Social Work, and several faculty and staff, experienced significant flooding and many were forced to evacuate their homes and communities. While the extent to which personal property, including homes and other belongings, was lost among those impacted varied, the trauma experienced by all was significant. For our students, this trauma was heightened by the anxiety that already existed due to the start of the academic year, which had begun just one week prior to the storm. In the days that followed, many of our students expressed concerns about how Hurricane Harvey and the university's closure would impact their assignments, due dates, completion of field hours, and even their timeline for graduation. During this time, I found that it was most helpful to be in regular communication with our students to assure them that accommodations would be made as a result of what now would be a shortened semester. Primarily, I wanted to ensure that our students focused on their health and their safety, and not be worried about school. To this end, I am greatly appreciative of the GCSW faculty and to the administration of the University of Houston, who uniformly emphasized flexibility and understanding as our students gradually adjusted back to the routine of the academic semester once the University of Houston campus reopened on September 5, 2017.

While the devastation inflicted by Hurricane Harvey was clear, and the challenges for our students, faculty, and staff would continue throughout the semester, I was also amazed to witness the incredible heroism and grace that emerged from this historic storm. Hurricane Harvey, as devastating as it was, also shined a light upon Houston as a model for strength, resiliency, and hope. As the weeks following the storm unfolded, I was struck by

the generosity of this community and its residents, as we all came together to help those in need. Shelters were opened overnight, massive donations of food, clothing, and cash were received daily, and Houstonians were in the streets and in our neighborhoods, cleaning out houses, removing debris, and ensuring that the most vulnerable residents of the city were safe and sheltered. As the most diverse city in America, we came together to achieve our common goals, to value and seek each other's unique strengths, and to serve our neighbors and our communities in ways that showed we are all in this together. As a non-native Houstonian, I felt proud of this city and proud to call Houston my home.

Also, I was particularly proud of our students and alumni who answered the many calls for help, especially those specifically requesting social workers at the numerous shelters that had opened across the city. Our students and alumni provided much of the mental health and crisis services to those impacted by the storm and continue to do so today. In addition, our students, faculty and staff sponsored clothing drives, food drives, diaper drives, and many other activities in addition to the numerous volunteer hours they contributed to those in need.

I am also grateful to the many calls and offers of help from colleagues across the country, from schools of social work near and far. Your thoughts and messages of solidarity and concern were greatly appreciated by all of us, and I am honored to be a part of this incredibly generous social work community.

As the weeks following the storm unfolded and some sense of normalcy emerged, I am also incredibly proud of our students, faculty, and staff for diving back into the work we have committed to doing and to the outcomes we are committed to achieving. At the Graduate College of Social Work, our vision is to achieve social, racial, economic, and political justice, local to global, and Hurricane Harvey did nothing to impact our resolve and dedication to pursuing this vision. Our student-led Policy Insiders Advisory Committee hosted events focusing on hot topics in immigration policy and re-entry programs for those involved in the criminal justice system. We welcomed Jeff Hobbs to campus, author of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*, our Social Justice Summer Reading selection, who met with students and presented to our broader social work community. We concluded the semester with an inspiring presentation from DeRay Mckesson, a national leader in the Black Lives Matter movement, followed by a student-led demonstration to "Take a Knee" to raise awareness for racial justice, abuse of power, and freedom of speech. Our students and our GCSW community faced the challenges brought by Hurricane Harvey, and responded with unwavering resolve to advance our vision, despite those challenges.

Building on our strengths and our achievements this semester, we are looking forward to continuing what is certain to be long running recovery efforts, as well as

continued opportunities to achieve our vision. Although we have all been impacted in some way, the devastation left behind by Harvey is vastly overshadowed by the selflessness and grace of Houston's residents, as well as our common resolve to move forward and to serve. At the Graduate College of Social Work, our vision is our priority, and we will continue pursuing this vision until justice is no longer an aspiration, but a reality.

Alan J. Dettlaff was appointed Dean of the Graduate College of Social Work and the inaugural Maconda Brown O'Connor Endowed Dean's Chair in May 2015. Prior to joining the University of Houston, Dean Dettlaff served on the faculty of the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He received his bachelor's degree in social work from TCU, and master's in social work and PhD from the University of Texas at Arlington.

Dean Dettlaff's work focuses on improving outcomes for children and youth in the child welfare system through examining the factors contributing to racial disparities and improving cultural responsiveness. His research and consultation with state child welfare systems has led to significant policy and practice improvements that have resulted in reductions in the overrepresentation of African American children in these systems. Dean Dettlaff has also conducted groundbreaking research to identify and understand the unique needs of immigrant Latino children and families involved in child welfare.

Dean Dettlaff is co-editor of *Addressing Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in Human Services: Multisystemic Approaches and Immigrant and Refugee Children and Families: Culturally Responsive Practice*, published by Columbia University Press. He serves on the editorial boards of *Child Welfare*, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and *Journal of Public Child Welfare*.